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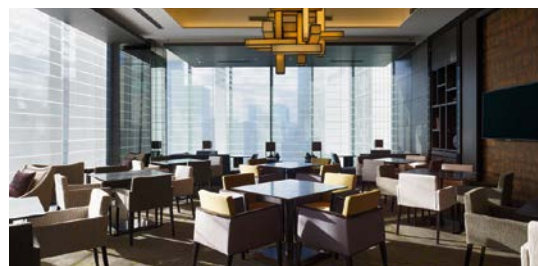
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Photo by Davi Azevedo

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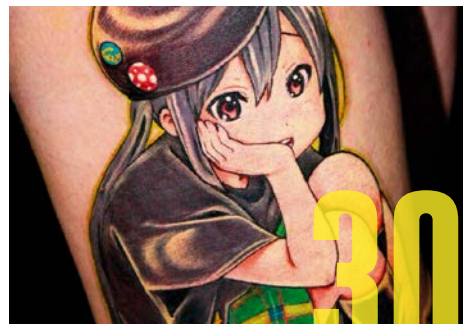


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Geek Ink: Exploring Japan's otaku tattoo culture

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IN FOCUS


Japanese macaques warm themselves at Jigokudani Snow Monkey Park in Nagano, by Simone Chen



MARCH 2016
Cover photo and design: Kohji Shiiki

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Tsukasa Takeda, *Emergence*, 2014



Photo: Greg Gorman

FEB 19-MAR 15 NEW WAVE ARTISTS 2016

Whether traditional or contemporary, intrinsic to every great work of Japanese art is the creators' deep respect for aesthetic sensitivity. Blessed are the Japanese with their keen eye for detail, and their ability to see and depict the beauty and nuance of life through art. Tokyo Metropolitan Museum's *New Wave Artist 2016* showcases works by up-and-coming Japanese artists—all of whom embody this unique characteristic, but with powerful individuality. Whether it's the intertwining of nature and modernity expressed in Yota Hanazawa's paintings, the dark and intricate oil-on-panel works by Asako Toda, or the timelessness of stones invoked in Daiki Nishimura's sculptures, visitors can get a glimpse into the future landscape of Japanese contemporary art in this unmissable exhibition, with each work showing great promise. **Until Mar 15. 9:30am-5:30pm (closed Mar 7). ¥300-500. Tickets at the door. The Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. Ueno. Tel: 03-3823-6921. www.tobikan.jp/en/exhibition/h27_newwave.html**

MAR 3-6 JAPAN FISHERMAN'S FESTIVAL

In case you don't know, Japan is an island nation obsessed with seafood. Fish—raw or cooked—is an integral component in Japan's culinary appetite, and is held to a higher standard than anywhere else in the world. Top-shelf bluefin tuna, for instance, often comes with an astronomical price tag at Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market, and many restaurateurs are more than willing to fork over the big bucks for quality. It goes without saying, then, that the Japan Fisherman's Festival is a big deal in Tokyo. For four days, Hibiya Park is transformed into a rustic hawkers' fish market of old, with numerous seafood vendors touting all sorts of delicious creatures, from oysters to crab. While the Japan Fisheries Association's fish is a big draw at the event, food options—as well as some chefs—come from all over the world. The last day, however, turns the spotlight squarely on Japan, when the "Fish-1 Grand Prix" pits local producers against each other to determine Japan's best fish. **Mar 3-6. Hibiya Park. Hibiya. www.jff.jp**

MAR 7-8 JACOB COLLIER

"Virtuoso" is an understatement when describing a unique talent like Jacob Collier. Ever since his first YouTube upload in December 2011, the London-based singer/multi-instrumentalist had gone on to become a global sensation, garnering accolades from musicians and music lovers alike. But his creative prowess goes beyond just arranging and covering music—the 20-year-old has gone on to design and build his own solo performance vehicle which enables him to bring to life his trademark multifaceted YouTube creations, in which he sings all the parts and plays every instrument live on stage. Jacob's very first solo show in Japan will take place at Blue Note Tokyo, where he will follow in the footsteps of jazz legends like Pat Metheny, Herbie Hancock, and Quincy Jones—who happen to be among Jacob's greatest fans! **Mar 7-8, ¥6,800, 6:30-10pm. Blue Note Tokyo. Omotesando. Tel: 03-5485-0088. www.jacobcollier.co.uk**



Photo: ©Alejandro Gonzalez



MAR 13 FIREWALKING FESTIVAL

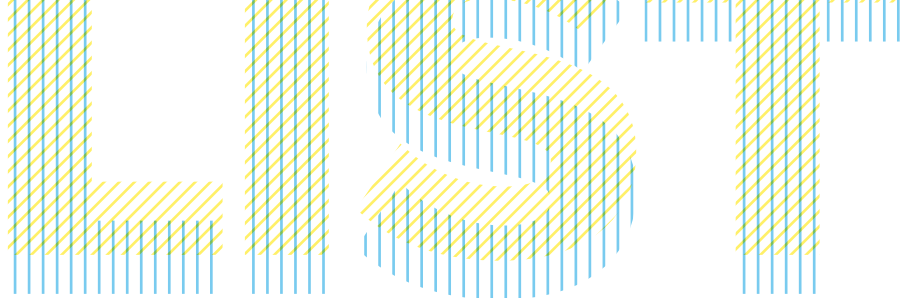
Spectators gather each year to witness the Mt. Takao Hiwatari-sai (firewalking) festival. Among the serene surroundings of Takaosan Yakuoin Temple atop Takao, onlookers can set their sights on the intrepid Shingon Buddhist Yamabushi monks, who chant as they march barefoot along a smoldering fire pit. Visitors are then invited to walk along the pit after it's been put out. The firewalking festival is a sacred ritual held at the temple which, according to Shingon Buddhist beliefs, is performed to rejuvenate spirits and protect families. Before braving the embers, the pious firewalkers first pray for safety, which seems reasonable given the inherent danger of walking on fire. Note: participants who wish to walk along the extinguished pit are advised to bring a towel. **Mar 13, 1pm. Takaosan Yakuoin Temple. Takaosan. <http://takaosan.or.jp/taiken/hiwatari.html>**

MAR 18 BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB

And yet again, we bid farewell to another great musical act this year; Cuban legends Buena Vista Social Club will be returning to Tokyo to play their final ever show in Japan. It was in 1997, five decades after the member's club of the same name in Havana had closed down, that band leader Juan De Marcos Gonzalez and a group of local musicians would join forces with American guitar legend Ry Cooder to record their seminal, self-titled debut album. Fast forward another twenty years and it is now time for curtain call. The band will pay their final tribute to Cuba's musical golden age; capturing the spirit of Havana in the 1930s. Omara Portuondo of Cuarteto d'Aida will be opening up the show, making this an unforgettable farewell. **Mar 18, 7pm. From ¥2,000. Toyosu Pit. Toyosu. Tel: 03-3531-7888. www.buenavistasocialclub.com/tour/**

MAR 19 ISSH FAMILY FESTIVAL 2016

Earlier than in past years, the International School of the Sacred Heart (Hiroo) will hold its annual Family Festival on Saturday, March 19. Visitors will be able to enjoy authentic international cuisine from over 15 countries, stage performances, a shopping bazaar, carnival games, and more. Entrance is free and you can buy tickets to redeem for food, drinks, and games. Raffle tickets may also be purchased for a chance to win exciting prizes. Proceeds go to educational programs at ISSH, as well as charities in Japan and overseas that support the healthcare and education of underprivileged children. The festival takes place rain or shine! **Mar 19. 10am-4pm. International School of the Sacred Heart Campus. 4-3-1 Hiroo, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo. Tel: 03-3400-3951. Hiroo. www.iss.ac.jp/page.cfm?p=369**



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Photo: Tomohide Hayakawa

MAR 12-13

ART IN PARK HOTEL TOKYO 2016

To be able to enjoy quality contemporary art from the comfort of a four-star hotel room would be a dream come true for art aficionados everywhere. *Art in Park Hotel Tokyo 2016* not only makes this dream a reality, but transforms two hotel floors and room interiors into a first-class art exhibition. Organized by Art Osaka, one of the innovators of Hotel-based art fairs in Japan, the event will show works that have shaped the world of modern art, as well as the shape of things to come. With 39 participating galleries to choose from, visitors can enjoy masterpieces by post-war contemporary artists from the celebrated "Gutai-ha" and "Mono-ha" movements in the mid-20th century, and cutting edge works by mid-career artists of today. The interior of entire hotel rooms being decorated is quite the sight to behold.

Mar 12-13, 12-7pm. ¥1,500. Park Hotel Shiodome 26 & 27F. ☎ Shiodome. Tel: 03-6452-1111. www.aipht.artosaka.jp/en

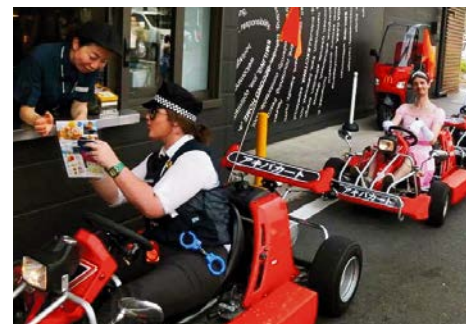


MAR 13

YOKOHAMA MARATHON 2016

March is a month when Japan feels a spring coming back into its step. And whether you're participating or spectating, marathons are a great way to get outside and enjoy the great weather. The Yokohama Marathon is the third-largest annual running event in Japan, after the Tokyo and Osaka marathons, with around 25,000 people from all over the world expected to lace up their sneakers and make the 10- or 42.195-kilometer run, or the two- or 10-kilometer wheelchair event. The marathon is a great opportunity to get in some good, quality sightseeing, as the course will pass numerous Yokohama tourist spots including the Yokohama Bay Bridge, the Port of Yokohama, and the historic Red Brick Warehouse.

Mar 13, 8:30am. Starts at Minato Mirai Ohashi Bridge; finish at Pacifico Yokohama. www.yokohamamarathon.jp/2016/en/



MAR 13

GO-KART LIKE THE IRISH

St. Patrick's Day is almost here, and while the prospect of drinking green beer until you start yelling at animals and eventually pass out sounds like a tempting option, you might consider something slightly more wholesome. Tokyo Gaijin suggests that you dress up green and take to the streets in their annual St. Patrick's Day weekend go-kart tour of Tokyo. People with a valid driver's license—sorry, kids—will have two hours of go-kart fun as they're let loose around the city. Past events have seen mobs of happy drivers zip by Shibuya Crossing dressed like Nintendo characters, feeling the wind on their faces as they shout, "I'm a gonna win." Tickets include a gasoline refill, driving guide, costume rental, accident insurance, and photos of the event. Drivers are required to have insurance.

Mar 13, 2:20pm. ¥7,300. Meet at Kitashinagawa Station. www.tokyogaijins.com/upcoming/go-karting-2016mar13.php



Photo: www.pixella

MAR 19-20

AOYAMA BREAD FESTIVAL

It's no secret that Tokyo is a hot contender for food capital of the world. As well as the usual lineup of Japanese food essentials, Tokyo also boasts a superlative range of international cuisines. And pastries are no exception: some of the best bakeries and pâtisseries are in Tokyo. The Aoyama Bread Festival brings together the best of Tokyo's baked goods scene with dozens of stores gathering for two days at the United Nations University Farmers' Market. Past years have included large selections on offer, from loaves and croissants to Japanese specialties like Hokkaido Milk Bread. There will also be numerous stalls selling all manner of non-baked goodies, so be sure to bring a large enough basket to stock up. **Mar 19-20, 10am-4pm. Farmers' Market at United Nations University.** ☎ Omotesando. www.facebook.com/events/1742338412652428/



MAR 30 EDITOR'S PICK

TWEEDY

Tweedy is the eponymously-named band of Jeff Tweedy, leader of famed alt-country group Wilco, and his 19-year-old son Spencer, who has previously worked on one of his father's production projects, playing drums on Mavis Staples' 2013 album, *One True Vine*. Wilco is familiar to fans here through repeated visits to Japan, but this tour marks the first by Tweedy himself. Fans of Wilco have nonetheless been impressed with Tweedy's solo effort, and reviews have been largely favorable. Supported by a cast of backup musicians, the pair in 2014 issued *Sukierae*, a reference to their wife and mother, who was then battling lymphoma. Concert-goers can look forward to live renditions of songs such as "Summer Noon," which featured as part of the soundtrack to the Richard Linklater film *Boyhood*. **Mar 30, 6-7pm.** ☎ Ebisu. Tel: 03-5464-0800. www.liquidroom.net/schedule/20160330/27180/ [Dan Grunebaum](#)



Photo: ©Makio Miyagawa

APR 9-17

LEGEND OF SHANGRI-LA

To create the exotic song and dance spectacular *Legend of Shangri-la*, director, dancer, and choreographer Yang Lipang spent years traveling the length and breadth of China, weaving together the ethnic traditions of its minority tribes. The Chinese dance sensation, who is a member of the Bai ethnic minority in China's southwestern province of Yunnan, has also talked about the strong influence that nature has on her work. Focusing on the mysterious parts of Western China and its Tibetan-influenced culture, the show was a smash in its first Japan runs in 2008 and 2010. The upcoming engagement is being billed as the last in which the 58-year-old Lipang herself will dance. **Apr 9-17. ¥6,000-12,000. Bunkamura Orchard Hall.** ☎ Shibuya. www.bunkamura.co.jp/english/orchard/20160409.html [Dan Grunebaum](#)

KAZUO KAMIMURA

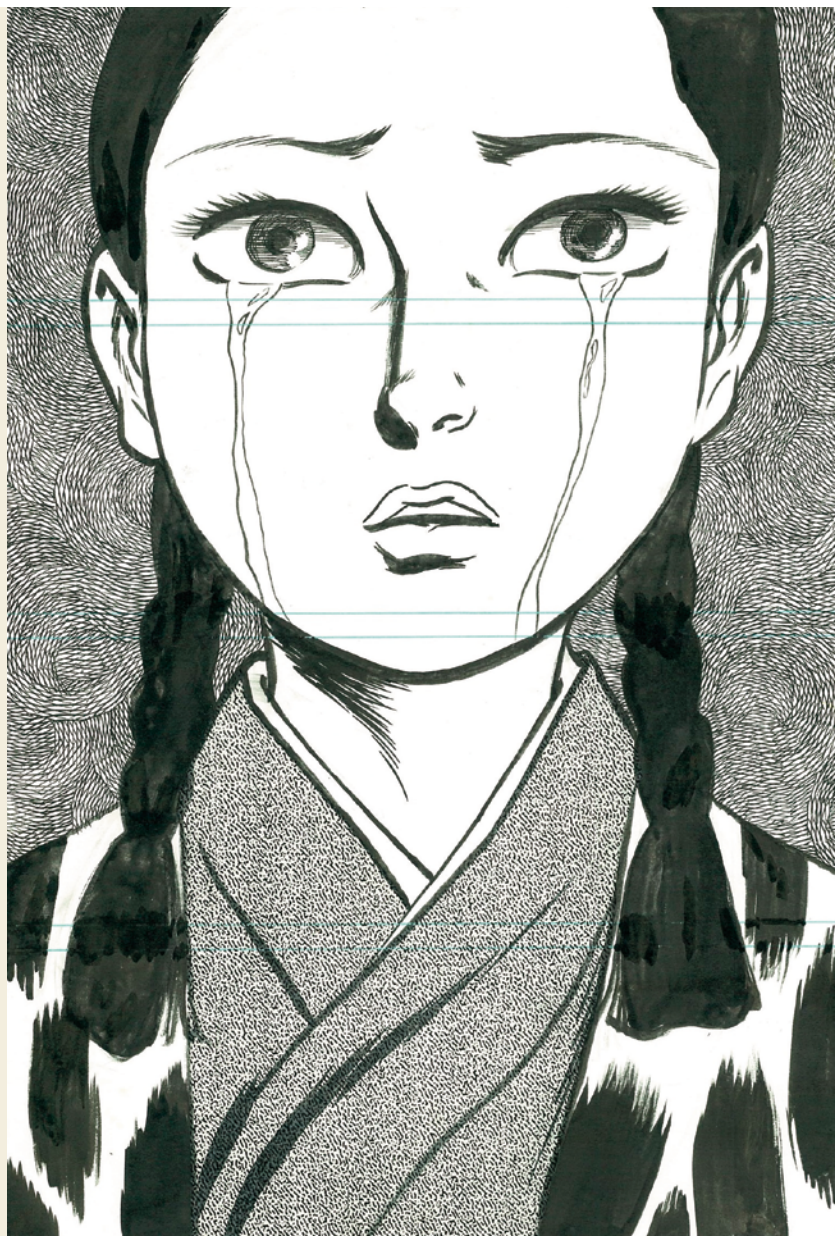
Gekiga and the anatomy of retro beauty on display at Yayoi Museum

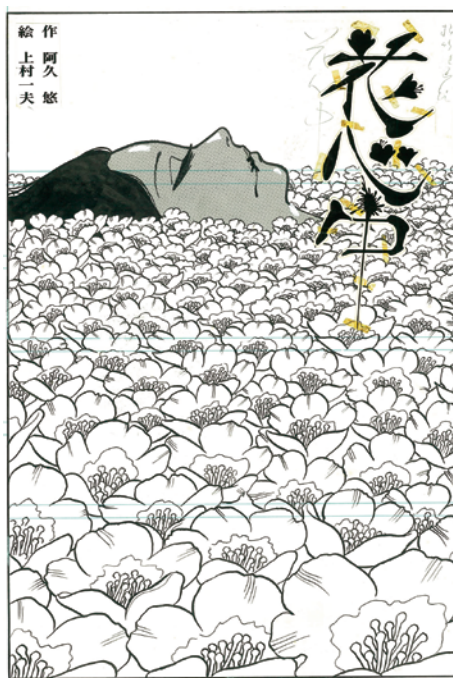
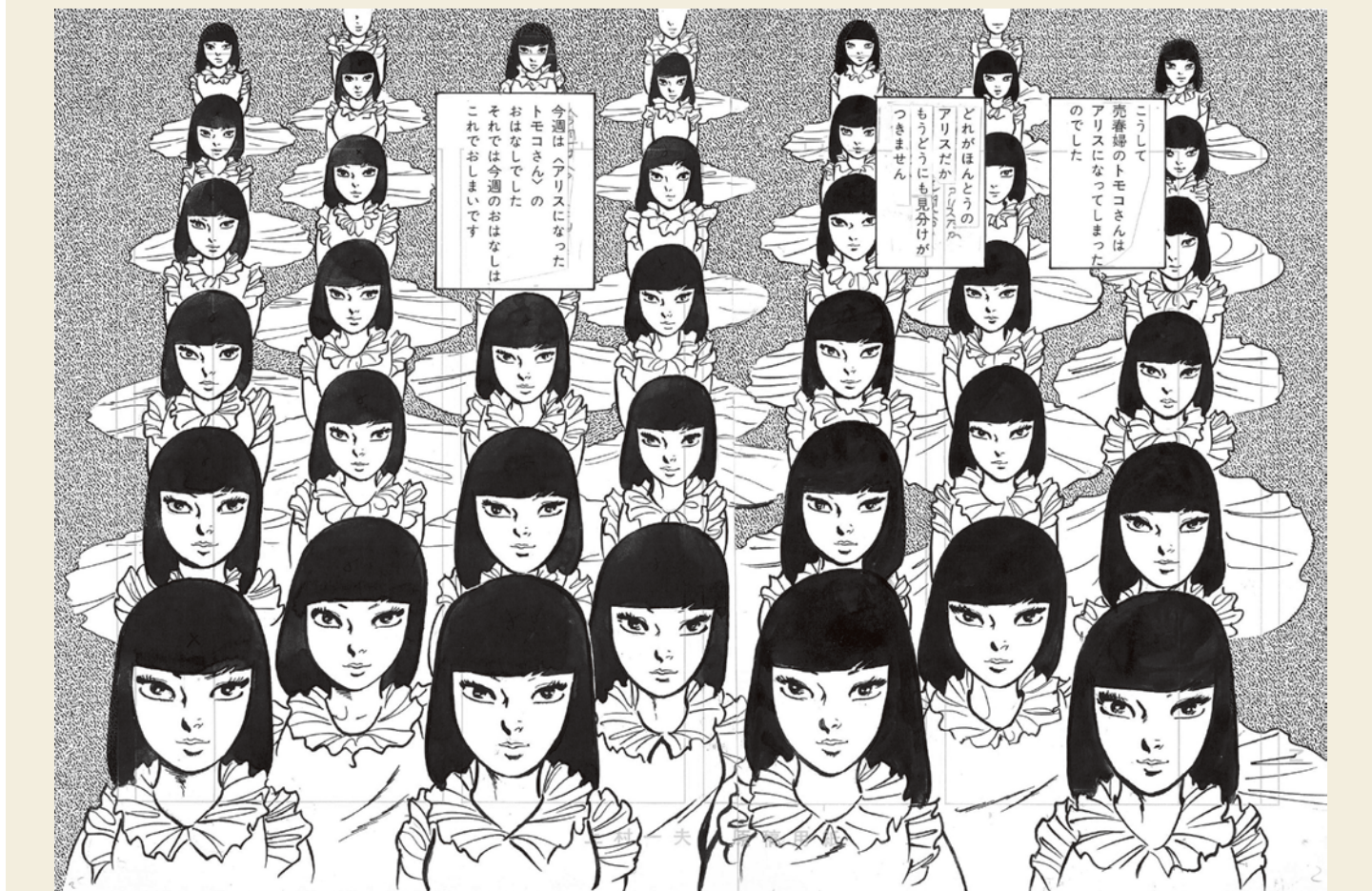
BY C.B. LIDDELL

My favorite museum in Tokyo is the quaint and charming Yayoi Museum. Not only is the building pleasant, old-fashioned, and a little out of the way; the venue's exhibitions usually feature excellent artists with whom I am not overly familiar. In other words, I always have a sense of discovery when I go there.

The latest exhibition, *Kazuo Kamimura: Anatomy of Beauty*, is a good example. It introduces the art of famous comic illustrator Kazuo Kamimura, whose fame may have faded since his heyday in the 1970s, but who definitely deserves to be remembered.

Kamimura had a relatively short life, dying in his 40s, but he packed a lot in. His career coincided with the rise and duration of “*gekiga*,” a more adult-oriented comic genre that featured sophisticated storylines, psychological depth, and strong characterization; and which favored a style that juxtaposed expressive innovation with gritty realism. The term is perhaps similar to what's meant by “graphic novel” in English, but with a much wider and deeper cultural impact.





The main delight of gekiga to modern audiences is the wonderful retro quality, revealing a world where style and sexuality had a sharper edge than they do today, in these more relaxed times.

In the gekiga world, Kamimura was especially important in blazing a trail for female characters. Previously, women had appeared in comics only as adjuncts to men, but taboo-breaking comic series like *Dousei Jidai* ("The days of living together without marrying"),

and *Sachiko's Happiness*, Kamikura featured women as central characters, and found innovative ways to express their inner world of ideas, feelings, and even sexual climaxes.

A panel from *Sachiko's Happiness* artistically expresses the heroine's ultimate erotic joy with a stream of butterflies pouring out of her body. Sounds corny, but Kamimura pulls it off.

Using unusual angles, symbolic objects, and revealing close-ups, Kamimura not only

conveys the moods of his characters, but he also succeeds in creating stand-alone, aesthetically pleasing imagery full of luscious lyricism. His artistry led him to attempt more ambitious projects, such as *Yaeko*, a comic series dealing with the life of the Japanese artist Yumeji Takehisa, another artist who died in his 40s.

This Takehisa connection is pertinent because the Yayoi Museum is twinned—and even physically joined—to the neighboring Yumeji Takehisa Museum, where you can also see a permanent exhibition on Takehisa. Indeed, I often think of these two museums as Siamese twins.

The exhibition is well-organized, with the original artworks clearly arranged under the titles of the various comics that they appeared in. There's also some English guidance—even though there are few foreign visitors—possibly because it's in the vicinity of Tokyo University.

Through the popularity of his comics, Kamimura became something of a celebrity and *bon viveur*. There are photos showing him and some of his associates. Through his fame, he was also able to branch out into designing posters and record covers, and the exhibition also includes a selection of these.

From all this, one gets the impression that he was perhaps burning the candle at both ends, working hard and playing hard, which might account for his early death. Luckily, though, his art lives on.

Yayoi Museum. Until Mar 27.

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Ramen and an ode to Azabu

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY VESNA KEVORK

When you live in an area that others from afar would travel to, you tend to take that location and all its treasures for granted after a while. This was the case with the local ramen place that I frequent; I didn't even realize this until I found myself recommending it to friends flying in from overseas who desired delicious ramen. I instinctively found myself saying, "We could pop by Manrikiya after our *de rigueur* Tokyo Tower visit."

Manrikiya is situated along the main street of Azabu-Juban. Its appearance is very old-school Japanese, from another era. I find myself conjuring up images of Kawagoe, as the vibe is the same. The restaurant stands next to a Japanese seafood *izakaya*, another establishment with a similar feel and vibe. I appreciate the contrast between the ramen place and the surroundings: a fur coat boutique, a sake store next door, and Starbucks across the road.

As you enter, you can tell that the restaurant tries to instill humor and get a good laugh, as there is a turned-over barrel of sake at the entrance with a sign that reads, "Take free bottle of sake, let us know." The wall inside is painted with a slogan declaring that "beer refreshes you after work." I find this funny and charming, and it adds to the casual but fun and playful vibe of this ramen *izakaya*.



The menu is vast and reasonably priced. Nearly all ramen options are under or approximately ¥1,000. They've got all the classics, such as the braised pork noodle soup (¥930), hot and spicy thick noodle soup (¥1,050), shrimp wonton ramen (¥1,050), stir-fried green leek noodle soup (¥890), and my favorite, tantanmen (spicy sesame noodle soup, ¥930).

Other items on the menu are grilled and steamed dishes, salads, *gyoza*, and fried rice. Some of their specialties include steamed chicken with sesame sauce (¥840), grilled herbal chicken (¥840), stir-fried pork, and cabbage with spicy miso sauce and fried *gyoza* (¥480). The fried *gyoza* is delicious and gigantic, and its shape non-traditional—it's shaped like Spanish *churros*. I always feel like I'm just about to eat *churros con chocolate*, and am surprised by the savory notes. Be prepared to leave bursting with fullness.

I opt for the tantanmen. The aroma hits me before anything else. I'm so impatient to try the ramen that I find myself staring at other patrons' ramen bowls. Discreetly, of course. But, longingly.

My bowl arrives and I am desperate to try it. Although everything cautions me to wait—the broth is boiling hot and steaming, the noodles are thick—I'm ready to burn my lips in order to taste it as soon as possible. The broth is heavy and dark, noodles thick and entangled, and the seasoning spicy and infused with sesame. Ground meat and scallions top the ramen, and the sesame seeds add a nutty flavor. Spicy comfort in a soup.

I eat it three times: visually, before I savour it; when I actually devour it; and after I do, I imagine it once again. The strong spices and sesame flavor leave me wanting more.

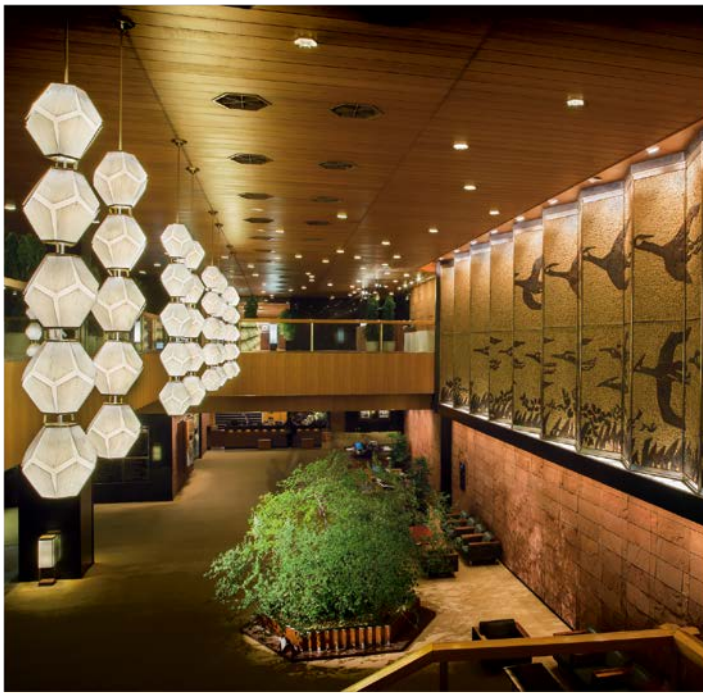
The vibe is casual and quirky, and the food is executed with style and precision.

A plastic clock hangs on one wall and diagonally above it, a grandfather clock. Another clock made from a vinyl record hangs on the other side. A mini Coca Cola refrigerator sits on the counter, containing everything but Coca-Cola. Next to it is a fish tank and the unexpected turtles. The interior is eclectic, quirky, and charming. The vibe is casual, playful, and fun, evoking nostalgia. The food is top-notch. Heaven for ramen lovers.

I challenge you to find your local favorites this week, and then recommend them to friends and strangers, so they can have the pleasure of getting to know your neighborhood, too.

Manrikiya. 2-3-2 Azabu-Juban, Minato-ku. Tel:03-5452-5510. 📍 Azabu-Jūban.





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CHEF MARIO FRITTOLI

Italian originality in Nishi-Azabu

BY LAURIER TIERNAN

Chef Mario Frittoli has his hands in many pies, from selling his cookbooks to consulting for Japanese supermarkets, to regular appearances on NHK's *Asaichi*. The essence of his passion, however, lies in his Mario I Sentieri restaurant in Nishi-Azabu. *Metropolis* caught up with the chef there to find out how he delivers the fruit of this passion.

Where are you from in Italy?

I'm from Viareggio, in Tuscany. Before I had my own restaurant, I worked in Paris, London, and Los Angeles. Twenty-five years ago, I was called here [to Tokyo] to open an Italian restaurant called "Il Forno." I thought it was fantastic, the way the Japanese were so meticulous, and so I never went back.

Was there a chef that you encountered in your youth who inspired you?

I went to culinary school from 14 to 17 years of age, and my professor used to work at a restaurant called "Angelo Paracucchi." Angelo Paracucchi was a very famous chef in Italy, close to the school. Since I had a very good relationship with my professor, he said, "Mario, please come over!" It was a Michelin two-star establishment; so since my start, food to me was "fancy."

With Mario I Sentieri, are you trying to deliver a purely Italian experience, or are you making

concessions to the Japanese palate?

In Greater Tokyo, there are 2,500 Italian restaurants. Everyone is trying to do spaghetti carbonara [or] pomo d'oro. My menu is very original. For example, in Italy, you have a potato gnocchi; here, we have pistachio gnocchi. We do things that are original and extravagant. We do, for example, pappardelle. Pappardelle is a big pasta that is very typical of Tuscany, but we do it with *inoshishi* [Japanese wild boar].

Since 2016 is a brand new year, is there anything new that you'd like to bring to the people?

Our Milano-style bar, sponsored by Campari, is much bigger than it used to be. And we now have a designated bartender who is also fantastic. In terms of other new things, we work with a lot of seasonal ingredients, so things are always changing. Also, I will be doing a lot of TV-related events.

You have been quoted as saying that Japanese food is "*komakai*," or meticulous. What is one word that sums up your cuisine?

It's an experience. A few appetizers, then fish or meat, and then you will see how I express my food and my personality. The plate is a canvas, and every day, I am expressing my personality with the fresh foods I receive from the market.

Any final words about the Mario I Sentieri experience?

Everyone has their own speciality. My speciality is pasta. The pasta here is very unique. Also, there are only three price ranges on the menu, because we believe that if you put too many things on the menu, you lose your creativity. The less we print on the menu, the more creative we can be for you.

4-1-10 Nishi-Azabu, Minato-ku. ☎ Roppongi. <http://mario-frittoli.com>

RECIPE

LINGUINE ALL'ARAGOSTA

BY CHEF MARIO FRITTOLI



Photos by David Azevedo



INGREDIENTS

140g dry linguine

SAUCE

- 1 ½ spiny lobster with shell
- 1 clove garlic, squashed
- 1 red pepper (Calabria)
- 1 twig basil
- 1 twig Italian parsley
- 2 small spoonfuls white wine
- 10g dried tomato, minced
- 2 big spoons (30cc) tomato sauce
- 3 fresh San Marzano tomato
- 15g fresh Momotaro tomato, diced
- 15cc fresh cream
- Italian parsley, minced
- Pure olive oil to taste
- Salt and pepper to taste

TO FINISH

- Pistachio, minced

PREPARATION

1. Cook linguine al dente, about 10 min. Drain and set water aside.
2. Chop lobster into 2 cm-wide strips and set aside. In a large frying pan, pour olive oil and add garlic, parsley, and Italian parsley. Heat until fragrant.
3. Add the spiny lobster and sauté well. Add salt and pepper to taste, along with the red pepper. Pour in white wine, and add the dried tomato and tomato sauce and both kinds of fresh tomatoes. Stew briefly.
4. When tomatoes are cooked, add Italian parsley and fresh cream. Cook until the cream is heated. Remove the crushed garlic clove as well as the basil and Italian parsley twigs.
5. Add linguine to sauce. Add a little of the pasta water, stirring well. Serve on a platter. Garnish with minced pistachio.

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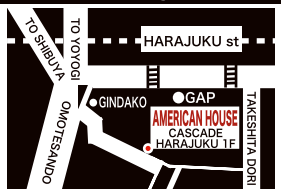
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COMMUNITY

TELL MOUNTAIN CHALLENGE

Thrills and chills on the slopes of Hakuba

BY MARTIN LEROUX



The snow-covered slopes of Hakuba beckon snowboarders and skiers seeking an adventure beyond the usual ski trip. The village, deemed Nagano Prefecture's prime locale for winter sports, certainly caters to visitors in search of a leisurely getaway with some fun on the slopes. But it also has plenty in store for thrill-seekers.

This year, Hakuba's Tsugaike Kogen resort is the site of TELL's first Mountain Challenge: an event that dares the most adventurous of athletes to dash down the equivalent of the world's tallest or iconic mountains.

For a weekend, the Mountain Challenge gathers ambitious skiers and snowboarders to participate in one of three events: the Team Challenge, the Individual Challenge, and the Kids/Beginners Challenge.



The entire mountain is open for participants to ski any piste they deem suitable, and map out a course that allows for the fastest descent and lift back to the top.

Groups in the Team Challenge are given the ultimate task of going down the slopes until they've traversed 8,848 meters—the height of Mount Everest—within one day. Endurance and stamina are key components to ensuring survival here. And of course, team members with intermediate or advanced skiing or snowboarding skills are vital as well.

Those who prefer to go it alone can do so in the Individual Challenge. Here, the challenger is pitted against the length of Mt. Fuji, which stands majestically at 3,776 meters. Meanwhile, children and novice skiers and snowboarders can tackle a course the equivalent of the 1,898-meter-high Mount Yotei, Hokkaido's highest mountain.



The challengers will record the distance they travel throughout the day with the Ski Tracks app.

It's not all about the distance you've skied, but also how you do it. The challenges will conclude with prizes in various categories, awarded to the fastest individuals, as well as the best-dressed teams and single challengers. A charity raffle ensues, increasing the chances of going home with a grand souvenir beyond the snow in your boots. The prizes will be given out at the monster after-party, which will feature DJs and bands from Tokyo.

The Challenge, held in partnership with winter sports travel group Tokyo Snow Club, is a new series in TELL's fundraising events, joining the non-profit organization's lineup of annual walks and frequent live music events to raise both funds and awareness.

Participants are encouraged to get sponsored by friends, family, and colleagues using the CrowdRise online sponsorship platform. The proceeds will go toward funding TELL's ongoing work to provide mental health support, as well as face-to-face and anonymous telephone counseling to Japan's international community.

Are you up to the challenge of being a hero on the slopes—and in the community?

INFO

TELL MOUNTAIN CHALLENGE

Dates: Mar 25-27; challenge day: Mar 26.

Packages including round-trip transportation from and to Tokyo, two-night accommodation, three meals, ski passes, participation fee, and entry to the TELL Mountain Challenge after-party are available, starting from ¥32,900. Challenge-only package also available. Equipment rental available onsite. For inquiries, e-mail tmc@telljp.com or visit <http://tellmountainchallenge.com>.





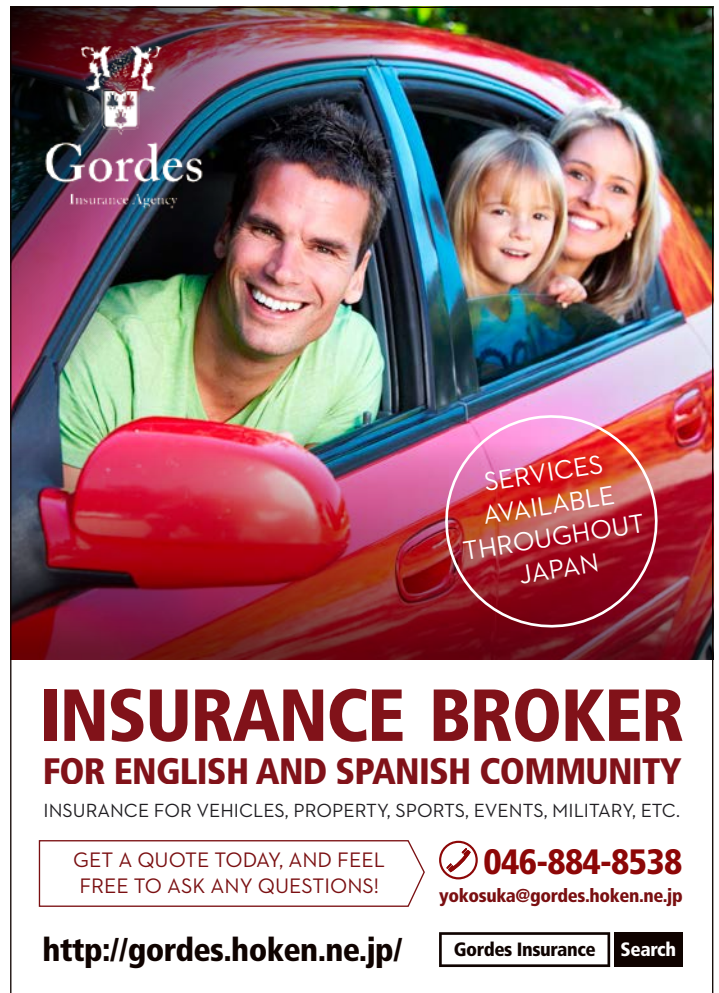
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MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

BY BRAD BENNETT, OWNER OF
FREEWHEELING TOKYO BIKE ADVENTURES
AND URBAN HIKING TOURS

“Many rivers to cross to find my way home.” I would sing this Jimmy Cliff song as I rode my bike through Western Tokyo, trying to find my six-mat room near Meguro Fudo Temple. It was 1991: I was young and lost, and cycling was not cool.

Fast-forward 25 years, and I see more bikes on the road, more bike lanes. People even go on dates by bike and hang out at Blue Lug bike shops on the weekends. Cycling in Tokyo is still dangerous, but it's finally cool. And hopefully elected officials and groups like The Cycling Embassy of Japan will continue to influence people in power to create a better infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists throughout the country.

If you want to avoid fossil fuel-burning death machines altogether, I recommend the many river paths of Western Tokyo. My bike tour customers always rave about the Kanda River path from Kanana Street to picturesque Inokashira Park, which stretches about 10 kilometers. This well-maintained bike path follows the Inokashira Line and offers abundant views of cherry blossoms, funky neighborhoods, and the worthy Ghibli Museum—be sure to get your tickets in advance!

You can extend this ride a further 10 kilometers by connecting with the faster-paced Tamako



Cycling path, accessed from the northwest side of Mitaka Station, just off Inokashira Street, about four kilometers from Inokashira Park via the Tamagawa-Jōsui. The Tamako Jitensha-dō road was originally a train line to Tama Lake, and has fortunately been preserved as a busy green corridor through residential areas.

The Zempukuji River path entrance is a kilometer north of the Kanda River, in the next small valley on the west side of Kanana Street. This historical windy route passes by the beautiful Omiya Hachiman Shrine and the Sugunami Historical Museum (¥100), where you can see traditional Japanese farmhouses and informative exhibits. This path is more than 10 kilometers long and is better suited to a slower pace. Families and group tours recommended.

Further west, the “Tama River cycling” is the premiere all-season route for roadies and mountain bikers looking for a dirt- and car-free environment. From Haneda to Hamura, you can ride for more than 40 kilometers, watching the city fade away as you climb through the Musashino plain towards Okutama. At the time of writing, the Tama River cycling path was under construction in several places, and you might notice a change in the quality of the bike path pavement, depending on which side of the river you ride.



For a slower pace, the Nogawa River path can be accessed at the confluence of the Tama and No rivers at Futakotamagawa, where my son learned to ride a bike. Threading its way through Komae, Chofu, Jidaiyubori Park, and finishing at the green fields of Nogawa Park, this path is beautiful every season, with bird-watching, nice views, and good sunlight.

For beginning cyclists and car-free environments, Yoyogi Park, Komazawa Olympic Park, Kinuta Park, and Showa Kinen Park in Tachikawa offer bike rentals and safe learning areas.

For urban hiking, slow-speed cycling, and spring photography, the Meguro River, Sagami River, and Nomi River are great for a stroll or a cruise, but leave the lycra at home for these routes. Some useful links for Cycling in Tokyo: <http://freewheeling.jp>, www.tokyobybike.com, <http://cycling-embassy.jp>.





THE INBOUND IMPACT

There is no doubt that the euphemistically termed “inbound phenomenon” has changed the face of Japanese retail. An unprecedented number of international visitors now make Japan their shopping destination of choice, rather than focusing on the cultural consumption that used to be the primary draw for travelers. Where once a vaguely bilingual counter in a souvenir hub would have been sufficient, the current crop of shoppers are as likely to buy international brands as domestic. This forces the market to re-localize international brands for the Japanese market into a bevy of foreign languages, work out the tastes and buying habits of customers from different countries on the fly, and do battle with their domestic competitors.



It has been a shot in the arm for the economy, but a surprise for the overall retail landscape. Up until now, there have been many attempts to bridge Japan’s cultural capital with a global audience, with the Japanese market dictating how it is to be packaged and delivered.

However, the recent wave of inbound shoppers turning up with wallet in hand has put the Japanese market on the passive back foot, forcing the market to react to their needs. On the micro level, it has birthed a flurry of short-term solutions to capitalize on the inbound tide: hastily-erected foreign customer service counters, machine-translated bilingual guides, or the staff getting to use the English forced on them in school.

To the backdrop of ringing tills, a couple of quirky phenomena have popped up in parallel. These include the unpredictability of which will be the “it” items for the nouveau riche. Who saw Issey Miyake’s Bao Bao bags outstripping Vuitton? Or shops dedicated to regrettably-departed Goro Takahashi’s cult silver brand Goro’s popping up all over Harajuku, a luxury the inbound simply don’t have.





The fact that people are actually shopping has been a boon for the Tokyo market—especially in Harajuku, where shopkeepers long bemoaned that tourists were on a fashion safari, not looking to buy. Concerns are rightly raised over how long this can last, and how to persuade a consumer to buy into Japan beyond what's on the shelves. The signs are all over the city that the market is shifting from passive to active, embracing change and ensuring it works for them, finally ushering in the age of duty-free shopping everywhere and 24/7 ATMs that accept international cards.

But more importantly, it's the opportunity to welcome visitors to Japan that's the most important paradigm shift. In the same way so many were intoxicated by Japanese pop culture before they found the country beyond, the market has finally begun to package the product with the context it grew out of. It is no mean feat to make home appliances a path to soft power; it's a necessary one to make sure that Japan remains a brand beyond the sum of its parts.



THE NEXT GENERATION OF DUTY FREE

Taking the lead on making sure that international customers get the authentic Japanese shopping experience is, appropriately enough, Japan's first department store, Mitsukoshi. The shopping center has ensured that international customers are welcomed to a cultural resort in addition to a commercial one, providing English-language guidance in-store and online, to both shoppers and those looking to learn. Their latest venture is their most ambitious yet, transforming the entirety of Ginza Mitsukoshi's eighth floor into a duty-free paradise specifically targeted at the rapidly rising inbound clientele.

Until now, this has been the kind of duty-free shopping usually confined to airports, a setting that is rarely conducive to a relaxing shopping



experience. The Japan Duty Free Ginza floor amends this, offering the kind of laid-back setting and attentive service you would expect in a Ginza department store. But most importantly, the cultural framing puts the space through a Japanese lens, ensuring *omotenashi* from the staff. Even the interior design takes its calls from traditional nature-inspired spatial architecture.

Needless to say, the usual duty-free purchases are well represented, including the luxury end of spirits, big-ticket timepieces, luxury cosmetics, and high-fashion purchases. There is the added bonus that customers are in no rush to make their decision before the items are delivered on their behalf to Haneda or Narita Airports in time for their departure.

However, the most progressive addition is the pairing of high brands from around the world with a "Japan Masterpiece" lineup that explores crafts and artisanal *kogei*. Technology thrives in the "800 Hands Japanese Beauty" section, uniting the latest digital cameras, innovative Good Design award-winners, and hints of popular culture—all against a background of the established arts that ought not to be neglected.

Inviting customers to take their time and explore the area is the interactive zone designed by Takram Design Engineering. A number of boarding cards, when placed on the low pillars, form interactive displays that become a ticket to explanations of the arts on offer, fashion films, and guides to the city. Elsewhere, there's a reception where various languages are catered for, as well as money exchange and WiFi, making this the definitive duty-free destination in the heart of the city, away from the airport. An enviable experience liable to court the inbound shopper, but it's worth mentioning that Japan residents need not be jealous, given that these services are also open to everyone leaving the country via Haneda or Narita Airports.

Japan Duty Free Ginza. Mitsukoshi Ginza Store, 8F. <http://mitsukoshi.mistore.jp/store/ginza/>



FEATURED MOVIE

SHERLOCK: THE ABOMINABLE BRIDE

The Emmy-sweeping *Sherlock* television series, jointly produced by the BBC and WGBH Boston, successfully tweaks the tried-and-true Arthur Conan Doyle formula by setting the action in the present day. So far it has comprised three three-episode seasons as well as this special holiday one-off, aired January 1 of this year. The episode stars Benedict Cumberbatch as the legendary “consulting detective” and Martin Freeman as Doctor John Watson. Both have taken home Emmys for their efforts,

and the movie is spiced with their constant, quick-witted banter. Rupert Graves plays Inspector Lestrade, and Andrew Scott is suitably chilling as the arch-villain Moriarty. Apparently someone thought the one-off would work as a stand-alone theatrical release, and it does, mostly. Through some sort of time-travel device—I’m betting opium dreams—most of the action takes place in the original canon’s Victorian Era setting. Viewers not familiar with the TV series, like me, may find the present-day bookends and the occasional

bridge-building bits a tad befuddling, but once past that, this is devilishly good fun. The titular mad bride (Natasha O’Keefe) goes on a very public shooting spree and then blows her own head off, but later eerily returns to life to gun down her husband before disappearing into the fog to stalk and menace others. This iteration of the venerable classic is highly atmospheric, imaginatively filmed and played mostly for laughs. It will not, however, please everyone. The game’s afoot! Japanese title: *Sherlock: Imawashiki Hanayome*. (90 min)



CAROL

A shop girl in 1950s New York finds love with an older woman trapped in a loveless marriage. This sophisticated yet accessible romantic spellbinder by Todd Haynes (*Far From Heaven*, *I’m Not There*, *Velvet Goldmine*) will draw you in. You’ve seen roles tailored for a particular actor; expand that to an entire movie seemingly calibrated to match Cate Blanchett’s prodigious talents. And Rooney Mara matches her step for subtle step. Each glance, each touch, carries tremendous emotional weight. By the end, you may find that you care about these two individuals more than you thought you would. (118 min)



CATHEDRALS OF CULTURE

Six directors profile six iconic buildings, with each structure narrating its own segment in anthropomorphic first-person. If walls could talk. Some segments work better than others. Wim Wenders shows us why the panoptic Berlin Philharmonic was such a groundbreaker, Robert Redford examines the Salk Institute, and Michael Madsen looks inside Norway’s revolutionary Halden Prison. The Oslo Opera House and Paris’s Centre Pompidou also get walkthroughs, but Michael Glawogger’s segment on the National Library of Russia is almost indecipherable, narrated in a dense mix of quotes from the books it houses. (175 min)



COOTIES

Well, how else would you title a zombie movie about undead elementary school kids? The infecting agent, transmitted by chicken nuggets, only affects pre-pubescent humans. I am not making this up. Elijah Wood plays a substitute teacher in a small-town school who has just rekindled a romance with his high school sweetheart (Alison Pill) when the ‘tweeners start eating the teachers during recess. The adults fight back with Ritalin. Rainn Wilson’s the jock teacher and rival for the sweetheart’s affections. This one-joke misfire would have benefitted from a bit more subversiveness and way better writing. Japanese title: *Zombie School!* (88 min)



THE FINEST HOURS

On a dark and stormy winter night in 1952, a tiny USCG craft pulled 34 crewmen off a breaking-up tanker off Cape Cod.

This is a wonderfully hokey fictionalization of the true event, an old-fashioned celebration of the endangered all-American hero. We know the outcome, but getting there is a hell of a ride. The immersive (sorry) SFX seem to put you in peril. A nicely underplaying Chris Pine does the hero duty, with Casey Affleck his counterpart aboard the stricken ship. It's a compelling story, but Disney felt obliged to pump up the drama, and a clichéd shore-bound romantic subplot almost sinks the film. Japanese title: *The Blizzard*. (122 min)



THE GUNMAN

French director Pierre Morel, who reinvented Liam Neeson as a bankable, middle-aged action hero, here

attempts to do the same for Sean Penn. And fails. A former assassin who helped Big Mining destabilize African nations so it could strip-mine their resources is now the target of a little evil corporation housecleaning. The obligatory, lackluster action scenes are mainly there to keep you awake, and the relentlessly dour plot's nearly incoherent. Double Oscar-winner Penn, who also produced and co-wrote, is one of our top actors. He deserves better movies than this talky Euro-thriller. So do you. (115 min)



UNBROKEN

Angelina Jolie's impressive second directorial effort is the straightforward telling of an astounding true tale.

1936 Olympian Louis Zamperini was shot down during a bombing run over Japan, survived six weeks in a lifeboat and then a POW camp. This ambitious film stars Jack O'Connell ('71, *Starred Up*), the script was polished by the Coen Brothers, and it was shot by Roger Deakins. A bit emotionally distant, but fast-paced and compelling. The man ultimately opted for forgiveness over revenge, and a coda featuring the real Zamperini returning to Japan—for the Olympics!—is highly moving. Japanese title: *Fukutsu no Otoko: Unbroken*. (137 min)



MAGGIE

It was only a matter of time before Schwa-chan showed up in a zombie flick. Hell, Seagal did one, and it was one of

the funniest movies I've ever seen. Plot has to do with a caring father trying to protect his infected daughter until she "turns." Then he has to shoot her. It's a fun piece. This one-note family drama masquerading as a horror movie is mostly Abigail Breslin watching her body gradually decay through creepy clouded contacts, and a bearded, introspective Arnold gazing at sunsets through furrowed brows. Stretching his range, I guess. Paced, I suppose appropriately, at a shuffle. (95 min)



THE MARTIAN

When an astronaut is mistakenly left behind on Mars, he and his colleagues must devise an impossible rescue

mission. The film eschews the emotional and metaphysical aspects of more serious sci-fi movies, but that doesn't mean it's dumbed down. And how can a movie so full of science be so funny? The director is Ridley Scott (*Alien*, *Bladerunner*), who knows how to tell a rigorously realistic story. Here he uses science to solve problems and manages to make it riveting. This is popcorn cinema at its best: a brainy, phenomenally entertaining, two-hour-and-24-minute, buttered bucket of "why we go to the movies." Japanese title: *Odyssey*. (144 min)



POINT BREAK

X-treme sports background video successfully recreates, ... nay, surpasses the vacuity of the original

1991 Keanu Reeves/Patrick Swayze cult fave about surfing bank robbers. This time, undercover FBI agent Johnny Utah (Luke Bracey, nicely matching Reeves's acting range) must infiltrate a smug, nearly nonsensical group of "extreme poly-athletes," spiritual eco-terrorists led by a macho-wonk named Bodhi (Edgar Ramirez) who believe they must complete a set of eight daredevil crimes and "give back" to nature. Beautifully filmed but awfully self-serious. Nobody's having any fun. X-tremely dull. Japanese title: *X-Mission*. (114 min)



STEVE JOBS

Are you ever very far from your smartphone? Apple's co-founder changed the way we look at technology. This

is not just a biopic about a guy who built computers, but a mesmerizing study of the high personal cost of genius. This smart and improbably entertaining film offers a knowing script by Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*), propulsive direction by Danny Boyle (*Trainspotting*, *Slumdog Millionaire*), and is acted to perfection by Michael Fassbender and Kate Winslet. Structurally, it quite literally takes us behind the scenes, as it unfolds almost entirely backstage just before three historic product launches. (122 min)



STRANGERLAND

Fifteen-year-old Lily (Maddison Brown) and 10-year-old Tommy (Nicholas Hamilton) seem to have wandered

off from their eerie rural Australian town and into the vast wilderness, leaving not a trace. Local cop Hugo Weaving investigates. Intriguing, no? Well, no. The film soon slips into a sordid outback mood piece centering on their loveless parents. And after spending nearly two hours in the screeching, recriminating company of these two (Nicole Kidman and Joseph Fiennes), I began to think about running away, too. To be fair, the actors have been given little else to do. Skip it, mate. Japanese title: *Nijihebi to Nemuru Onna*. (112 min)



THE WATER DIVINER

Russell Crowe packs a lot into his ambitiously noble directorial debut, starring himself as an Australian father in Turkey to learn

the fates of his three sons at Gallipoli. As it gleefully genre-hops from action to romance to politics, we watch Crowe ride a horse, hop a freight, shoot at a few nasty Greeks, and exchange meaningful glances with a comely Istanbul widow (Olga Kurylenko). Best are his scenes with a former enemy officer (Yilmaz Erdogan). It has been criticized, by Armenians among others, for its pro-Turkish slant and its simplistic handling of a period of great historical complexity. Japanese title: *Diviner: Senka ni Hikari wo Motomete*. (111 min)



LOVE THE COOPERS

Diane Keaton, John Goodman, Amanda Seyfried, Ed Helms, Alan Arkin, Marissa Tomei, Olivia Wilde, and Steve

Martin's voice ... and this poorly punctuated, treacly Christmas turkey is the best director Jessie Nelson could come up with? Actually, not that surprising given that he's responsible for such insufferable emotional button-pushers as *I Am Sam*, *Stepmom*, and *The Story of Us*. As usual with these tacky paycheck-collecting ensembles, there are half a dozen storylines, none of them remotely compelling, and all explained in a patronizing voiceover. I couldn't even like any of these people. The dog's cute. Japanese title: *Cooper-ke no Bansankai*. (107 min)



PADDINGTON

An anthropomorphic talking bear—no one is surprised by this—from "Darkest Peru" detains in the title London

railroad station, and is given shelter by the Brown family. There's a nice underlying message here of tolerance and acceptance. This easygoing take on the children's classic is rich in incidental detail, wordplay, visual puns, and even Rube Goldberg concoctions. Make no mistake; this is a kid flick—but parents will be entertained. Way above usual cynical, effects-laden bombs aimed at children. The SFX used here get the job done, and delightfully. This film respects your children. Bear hug. (89 min)



STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS

Relax, it's nothing like those misbegotten prequels. True to the spirit of the 1977 original,

almost to the point of seeming more like a remake than a sequel. Appealing new leads. Great seeing Harrison Ford and Carrie Fisher back. Wonderfully self-aware, it knows it's a legacy movie. In a brilliant move, even the new young characters are fans of the historical deeds of Solo and Chewbacca. It's fun! J.J. Abrams has risen to the challenge. It is not, however, a masterpiece. A good film, like this one, delivers everything we want. But a great film brings us things we didn't even know we wanted. Cryptic, I am. Japanese title: *Star Wars: Force no Kakusei*. (135 min)

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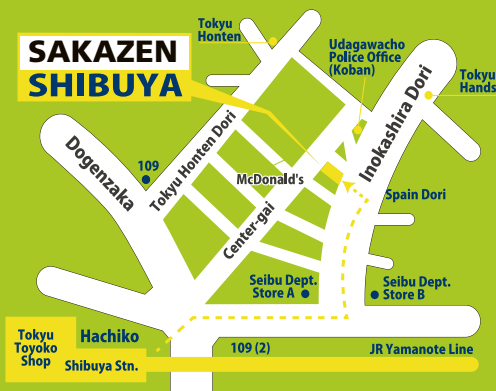
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Do You See Me? © 2014 Italian International Film

CINEMATIC UNDERGROUND

COMEDY DARK AND LIGHT

BY KEVIN MCGUE

A waft of European films floats into Tokyo on the spring breeze this month. Up first is the **Italian comedy** *Do You See Me?* at Shinjuku Piccadilly (3-15-15 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku; www.smt-cinema.com), starting March 5. Paola Cortellesi plays an architect who has enjoyed great international success. Homesickness prompts her to return to her native Italy, where the field is so male-dominated, she's completely ignored. (The original title translates as "excuse me for existing.") Her dwindling funds

force her to take a job at a restaurant, where she recruits allies and draws up blueprints for turning her life around.

The **extremely dark comedy** from Spanish director **Carlos Vermut**, *Magical Girl* comes to Human Trust Cinema Yurakucho (2-7-1 Yurakucho, Chiyoda-ku; www.ht-cinema.com) on March 12. On the surface, the story is about a girl stricken with leukemia hoping to make it to her 13th birthday, and her father desperate to raise the money to buy her a cosplay outfit based on

her favorite anime. If that weren't dark enough, the story also explores the other members of this dysfunctional family.

The **Italian drama** *Mia Madre* is on from March 12 at Cinema Qualite (3-37-12 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku; <http://qualite.musashino-k.jp>) Margherita Buy plays a film director who is having problems with her current production, including a temperamental American actor with limited Italian skills, played with great élan by John Turturro. While she faces the biggest crisis of her career, she learns her mother is dying.

And finally the **French comedy** *Serial (Bad) Weddings* plays starting March 19 at Yebisu Garden Cinema (4-20-2 Ebisu, Shibuya-ku; www.unitedcinemas.jp/yebisu). It follows a middle-aged Catholic couple in the French countryside who believes their lives will be turned upside-down when each of their four daughters marries a man of a different race or religion.



Mia Madre © 2015 Le Pacte

EIGA

CHILDREN OF IRON

BY ROB SCHWARTZ

Director Koki Fukuyama's coming-of-age story *Children of Iron* was the opening film last year at the Skip City International D-Cinema Festival, and with good reason. This charming, lilting flick is a wonderful piece of naturalist filmmaking, and so it should be: it's actually an autobiographical effort that the director wrote with his long-lost stepsister, and it portrays their childhood together. The piece starts as grade-schooler Mariko (Mau) and her lay-about father Kon (Jyonmon Pe) are moving in with similarly-aged Rikutarō (Taishi Sato) and his sweet mother Yayoi (Tomoko Tabata). The parents have gotten married and their offspring are thrown into the same house, and the same room even. As one might expect, both kids are bitter about the new circumstance and decide it's their task to break up the couple. And while the fact they grow to



Children of Iron © 2015 埼玉県/Skipシティ国際Dシネマ祭

love each other comes as no surprise, the way the story plays out is quietly powerful. Each character is well-developed. We see Yayoi become a mother to Mariko; the scene where she calls her "mom" for the first time is a heartbreaker. Similarly, we see a very human but irresponsible and self-

ish Kon act in ways not conducive to keeping the family together. And the children, highlighted by wonderful jobs by both kid actors, develop their own world which draws us in. The entire work is affecting but understated, and every note rings true. (Japanese title: *Tetsu no Ko*; 74 min.)

TUNING INTO TOKYO

10 Japanese bands to check out

BY ANDY HUGHES

There are so many bands in Japan that are worth listening to, I could write about them forever. Instead of doing that—and consequently dying in front of my computer—I decided to narrow it down to 10 lesser-known bands that deserve your attention. At the time of writing, most of these bands are still touring and play Tokyo often—so check them out!



Guitar Wolf



Toe



Polysics

Shinkou Houkou Betsu Tshuko Kubun

(<http://soundcloud.com/shinkou-houkou-3>)

This band packs sing-along choruses and deliciously discordant guitars smothered with fat basslines and erratic drums. It's difficult not to crack a smile listening to the uninhibited delivery of the vocals. Honestly, it's impossible. Just listen to them and see what I mean.

Ogre You Asshole

(www.ogreyouasshole.com)

If Johnny Marr likes them, they must be good, right? For fans of Talking Heads, Built to Spill, and Modest Mouse. In fact, Modest Mouse's bassist Eric Judy can take credit for helping them come up with their rather fetching band name—which, in case you were wondering, is actually a reference to the movie *Revenge of the Nerds*.

Noodles (<http://noodles.velvet.jp>)

Sweet-sounding grunge-pop in the same vein as Veruca Salt and The Breeders—Noodles even opened a show for them in 2003. One of Japan's best all-girl bands, and still going strong.

Polysics (www.polysics.com)

Eye-catching outfits and bizarre eyewear, this is noisy new-wave punk inspired by bands like Devo, Styx, and P-Model. They worship Devo so much that they've even borrowed guitar riffs from them to playfully pay tribute. Stunning dance moves, which are fortunately not just an empty distraction, because the music is just as strong as their entrancing theatrics. Cheeky music that doesn't take itself too seriously and is all the much better for it.

Guitar Wolf (www.guitarwolf.net/english)

Japan's greatest "jet rock 'n' roll" band since 1987. This is garage rock-punk soaked in feedback and distortion. Noisy, energetic, and catchy. You like your rock music raw and straight to the point? Look no further.

Minami Deutsch

(<http://soundcloud.com/minamideutsch>)

Fans of bands like Can will love this group. They proudly wear their krautrock influences on their sleeves and create simple, dreamy songs that are hypnotic when witnessed live.

Mutyumu (<http://sound.jp/mutyumu>)

A melting pot of styles including avant-garde, classical, and ambient. Their album *Ilya* is worth a listen for the piano performance alone. For a band who incorporate so many styles, the music all merges together and everything has a purpose, drifting from violent to gentle without any interruption to the flow.

Stan (www.youtube.com/user/stanofficial)

This is no-gimmicks music with classic rock-inspired guitar and funk bass lines punctuated by hard-hitting drums. It's a shame they are now defunct, but grab their album *Rock* and give it a listen. Solid songwriting with some infectious grooves.

385 (<http://385music.com>)

Noisy jazz-punk with a very peculiar singing style. If you're already a fan of Melt Banana and Midori, you will love this band. Boundless energy and a surprisingly big sound for a three-piece.

Toe (www.toe.st)

An angular mix of jazz fusion and math rock. They started out as an instrumental band but added vocals on their latest releases. Even though their sound is unconventional and filled with off-kilter rhythms and time signatures, they remain commercially accessible. Toe are very well-known in Japan, and their popularity continues to deservedly grow.



STOLEN. STOLEN.

BY DAN GRUNEBAUM

to-the-gut look at the need for connection—and what to do when your salaryman mate is never home—spiked with lines like “cloudy bottles of loneliness don’t do a fuckin’ thing / but I’ll be alright.”

A dark but redemptive outing stitched together by Canadian Mike de Jong’s keening Les Paul guitar and Kiwi Mel Ushikubo’s emotive vocals, the adult approach of “Out of Sight” is emblematic of the songwriting on Stolen.’s eponymous debut album.

The band’s lyrics are often written from the perspective of an adult woman. “Heelz,” for example, is an album-oriented rocker in which Ushikubo proclaims that she’s “digging my heels to make you stay,” while “Addiction” speaks of the heat of female lust for an appealing guy.

“Caroline”—with its hashtags “children, left-behind parents, loss, sadness, alienation”—is perhaps the most emotionally resonant song. Telling the tale of a girl from a broken home, the track can’t be listened to without thinking of divorcée de Jong’s struggles with Japan’s legal system to maintain visitation rights with his child. (De Jong is writing a book on his experiences.) The band’s name, in fact, nods to children who have been “legally stolen”—the members’ way of referring to Japan’s archaic custody laws.

The adult themes that lace Stolen.’s debut, and its consistently high grade of musicianship, give the album a grit that has seen it rise to the top of the iTunes indies charts in Japan. Recorded at Bungee Studio in Tokyo, the disc features a solid support cast backing Ushikubo and de Jong, including Simon McDowell, a professional drummer from New Zealand who’s supported top artists including Ed Sheeran, American bassist Tommy Jaime, and the latter’s wife Mizuki on keyboards.

From the generalist’s point of view, *Stolen.* is an album that will strike a note with fans of strong female alt-rockers like Alanis Morissette, and everyone who’s ever lived through the heartbreak that comes with the struggle for happiness, and has been around the block a few times in life.

But for Japan residents and other folks who find themselves overseas, *Stolen.*—and songs like “Against the Grain”—will resonate sharply with those who’ve experienced the loneliness of being an expat in societies that can sometimes be very closed to outsiders.

Stolen. can be appreciated regularly at favorite expat watering holes such as What the Dickens in Ebisu.

Stolen. out now; available on iTunes. <http://stolenjapan.weebly.com>.



HINDS LEAVE ME ALONE

BY ANDY HUGHES

of hype and anticipation. Was the wait worth it?

These young ladies from sunny Madrid take an American blueprint and serve up a deliberately lo-fi, fuzzy, reverb-laden brand of garage rock that’s been done to death. While doing nothing new, they certainly look like they’re having fun. Some moments are reminiscent of the Pixies and The Brian Jonestown Massacre, and there are oodles of 1960s surf rock influences.

They can barely play their instruments. There are flat notes aplenty and they sound like they’ve only just graduated from their bedroom, hairbrush as mic, to the stage—but that’s the golden ticket with this sort of music. Musical aptitude takes a backseat and the more ramshackle the playing, the more the charm. The flaws on this album are likely to be what proves to be appealing for fans of this sound.

However, the enthusiasm can only be a crutch for the rather average songwriting for so long. They seem like a band that is better seen live rather than listened to on CD. In person, their mistakes and inadequacies can be covered up by their infectious energy.

There are nice melodies here and there and the occasional glimmer of what could be more than the tired lo-fi garage retread, giving hope that they may grow into something special. But they certainly aren’t there yet.

Disregarding how repetitive and pedestrian the songs are, you may find this album easy to listen to, and could use it as background music when concentrating on something else. My first listen to this record went through one ear and out of the other as I watched, through my window, two tom cats fighting in a back alley. Mesmerized, I watched the furry critters partake in a stare-down that seemed to last an eternity. I wondered which of the two would make the first move. Finally, the small white cat plucked up his courage and inched towards his adversary to be rewarded with some swift claws to his face. The poor little cat decided to save himself from embarrassment and fled, while the larger one stood proud in the afterglow of victory. I turned away from the window with a smirk, and realized that the album was almost halfway through and I had no recollection of any of it. There’s nothing here that reaches out and grabs attention. It’s just not a very ambitious record. Perhaps the girls are happy simply having fun on stage rather than carving out something more distinctive musically.

They may serve as inspiration for some that anyone can play music. With enthusiasm alone, you too can make a band with your friends. But will Hinds remain happy with this, will they step up their game and take more time with their songwriting, or will they dissolve like so many before them?

Leave Me Alone out Mar 2.

AGRAPH

Electronic music isn't all about EDM

BY DAN GRUNEBAUM

In recent years, electronic music seems to have been largely subsumed by pop-oriented EDM. That makes the rise of Agraph's decidedly offbeat new album *The Shader* to the top of the iTunes Japan electronic music chart all the more unlikely.

"I made it as a soundtrack for walking my dog," Agraph (Kensuke Ushio) laughs about the genesis of the disc. "So it began very privately. But now, all of a sudden, it's very public. I'm surprised in some ways, because it's not typical of the EDM that currently dominates the electronic music scene."

Agraph says the album represents his life's work and that he was concerned how it would turn out. *The Shader* began when he was at an impasse, worrying about where to take his music next. Agraph began his career as a fan of Japanese techno kingpin Takkyu Ishino (the force behind Denki Groove and the Wire raves), and had limited success with his album *Equal*.

"The new record began as a logical progression from my first one," Agraph recalls. "But I felt it was repeating the themes too much and went through a long period of confusion about what to do. Then I had a breakthrough that led to the album in its current form."

It turns out an encounter with the experimental *Musique Concrète*—using various recorded sounds as raw material—of French composer Luc Ferrari led Agraph to upend his ideas. "I heard his music for a movie that was playing at a film festival," he explains. "It led me to approach composition not from the point of view of chords or melody or rhythm, but from the perspective of atmosphere. His music doesn't have any melody—he just edits together sounds. I felt I wanted to place primacy on mood rather than musical elements."

Talk like this could you lead one to think *The Shader* lacks melody and rhythm, which is far from the case. Tracks like the lead single "Greyscale" brim with dense

piano chords and even foot-tapping beats. It's not that the album is particularly challenging—in fact, its chart success attests to its approachability—but that its conceptual underpinnings give it an overall coherence often lacking in long-form electronic music outings.

Calling himself a "typical *hikikomori* [shut-in] bedroom music producer," Agraph's career says a lot about the important social role electronic music plays for many shy otaku types. He began as a raver, equipment geek, and fan. "I used to go out a lot, and would go to Takkyu's event[s]," Agraph remembers. "I kind of hit on him at the bar. I told him I liked his music. I said I wanted to

become a musician, and I'd studied engineering. So he just said, 'Well, come to the studio.'"

With his experience in Pro Tools, Agraph became Ishino's track manipulator, progressing to Denki Groove partner and finally solo artist. The path from equipment geek to artist, with visits to huge rave parties fueling interest in participation, is one many electronic music producers have taken.

But Agraph hasn't shed his fundamentally private nature. "I live outside downtown Tokyo, and I like to take long walks along the Tama River and compose music in my head," he says. "My music began very personally, but I want all sorts of people to hear it. It's instrumental music so hopefully it will have a wide appeal and produce various reactions."

www.agraph.jp

AGRAPH'S 5 ESSENTIAL JAPANESE ELECTRONIC MUSIC DISCS

Rei Harakami - *Red Curb* (2001)

"I've been listening to this album since my teens. When a classmate heard this at our reunion he was surprised."

Ryuichi Sakamoto - *Out of Noise* (2009)

"Sakamoto's work gives me a sensation somewhere between attenuation and reverberation."

Yosi Horikawa - *Vapor* (2013)

"Gorgeous soundscapes are layered, one atop the other."

Shinichi Atohe - *Butterfly Effect* (2014)

"I never tire of Atohe's textures and atmosphere."

AnchorSong - *Ceremonial* (2016)

"A tactile touch and musical outlook that I lack—endless fun to listen to."



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Nihonbashi Cherry Blossom Festival

Tokyo doesn't come much better than in springtime. With flora coming into bloom, the city comes alive and welcomes in the much cherished *sakura* (cherry blossoms), which for several weeks dust Tokyo in cherubic tones of white and pink.



There is arguably no better place to experience the *sakura* than Nihonbashi, a neighborhood in the center of Tokyo with historical roots as a central trading hub. Today, the area is a favorite among Tokyoites during the Nihonbashi Cherry Blossom Festival. The festival provides a great opportunity to experience the *sakura*, with popular tree watching spots, including "sakura scenery" from all of Japan's 47 prefectures.

For the duration of the festival, numerous shops will light up in beautiful *sakura* colors. Along the vibrant and historical Nihonbashi Sakura Dori, an immersive projection mapping show on Naka Dori called "Nihon Sakura Kaze Kaido" wraps you in the authentic feeling of *sakura* season through light and music, as if the cherry blossoms are snowing down upon you. Definitely a sight not to be missed.

Patrons of the festival are invited to sate their palates with the best food and drink that Tokyo has to offer. On March 26 and 27, you can walk back in time alongside Fukutoku Shrine and try the original menus of famous restaurants and shops at the stalls that line the streets. And from March 19 to April 10, experience The Best of Japan Gourmet Tour, at Coredō Muromachi, where you can sample different traditional Japanese foods, facilitated by an English-speaking guide. If you post photos on social media you will receive 50% off the price of the Gourmet Tour.

Between April 4 and 10, patrons over the age of 18 are invited to wet their whistles during the Nihonbashi Sakura Bar. Eighty stores take part in this highly-anticipated drinking event, with advance tickets selling fast (¥2,900 in advance; ¥3,100 via web on day of event; ¥3,300 at the door). The party then continues with the 4th Annual Nihonbashi Area Sake Walk & Taste Tour (advance tickets ¥2,500; regular price ¥3,000), where you can drink as much sake as you want from across Japan.

Patrons get a rare chance to see *sakura* in style, with *sakura*-themed transportation options including the Sakura Bus, Sakura Rickshaws, and, for its maiden voyage, the Sakura Boat.

Nihonbashi Cherry Blossom Festival. Mar 18-Apr 10. ☎ Mitsukoshi-mae or Shin-Nihonbashi. www.nihonbashi-tokyo.jp/en/sakura2016. Omotenashi Nihonbashi: www.nihonbashi-info.jp/omotenashi

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Craftsman Bidou Yamaguchi

TURNING MASTERPIECES OF ART INTO NOH MASKS

Bidou Yamaguchi opens new dimensions for mask making

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DAISUKE HAYATA
TRANSLATION BY JAY WALKER

According to archaeologists, the oldest mask in the world was discovered on an African wall painting that dates to approximately 4,000 B.C. Masks, in other words, have been with humans since the beginning of civilization, often being used in religious rites and ceremonies, as talismanic idols that contain the spirit of a god.

Masks have also played a central role in Japanese *noh* theater, ever since the medium's birth in the 14th century. In both the music and dance pieces and the theatrical performances that make up the plot of *noh* plays, *noh* masks (*nōmen*) have played a central role from the beginning, and are connected with the appearance of the gods on stage.

Most plotlines are adapted from Japanese myths and folk legends, and when *kami* (gods) appear on stage, the performers who play them

Bidou Yamaguchi is a theater craftsman who has spent his career creating *Noh* masks. Since 2014, his works have been on a touring exhibition in museums in such major American cities as Houston, Chicago, and Los Angeles. But why have his masks drawn such praise and interest in the U.S.A.?

“An Enigmatic Expression”: What the Mona Lisa and Noh Masks Have in Common

When Yamaguchi began making masks in 1992, he worked mostly on traditional *noh* masks. Today, a mask maker's work mainly involves restoring original masks to working condition or making duplicates of those traditional masks. Yamaguchi, however, quickly realized that working within those limits meant he would never overcome the medieval originals, and

put on masks to signify that they are no longer human. These masked performances, which convey the *kami*'s presence via thick, wooden masks frozen into a single expression, are necessarily highly symbolic, and call on the audience's imagination to interpret them. As a result, *noh* masks have taken on wildly diverse meanings, both in the *noh* repertoire and in Japanese culture at large.

exhibits more or less the same gaze. After he'd chosen the subject for his new mask, Yamaguchi gradually came to notice this similarity.

After *Mona Lisa*, Yamaguchi started creating a series of masks based on masterpieces of Western art, including Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665) and Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1486). These works quickly caught the eye of American art connoisseurs.

In 2011, after finishing the series on Western paintings, Yamaguchi shifted focus and began making masks based on the work of Tōshūsai Sharaku, a famous *ukiyo-e* artist from the 18th century. In his adaptations of the *Mona Lisa* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Yamaguchi tried to capture the light in the paintings by showing the women's faces in full three-dimensionality; but because *ukiyo-e* does not employ linear perspective, when compared to Western oil paintings it looks very flat. Turning a 2D painting into a 3D mask might seem difficult, but when he began working from *ukiyo-e*, which lacks any sense of volume at all, the task began to feel even more difficult.

Thanks, however, to the skill, experience, and imagination he had cultivated through his earlier work, Yamaguchi found success quickly.

Techniques Connect Ancient and Modern Worlds

Today, Yamaguchi has expanded his original training into an oeuvre that creates masks from Western masterpieces and the *ukiyo-e* of Sharaku. But from the mask maker's craft of duplicating originals, to the new challenge

he began to seek out new possibilities for mask making.

The result of his search appeared in 2003, when he reimagined Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503-06), expanding the two-dimensional painting into 3D relief as a *Noh* mask.

The choice, in retrospect, makes sense: if you compare the *Mona Lisa* with an *onna-men*—one of the representative female masks of the *noh* repertoire—you'll quickly notice how alike they are. The *Mona Lisa* is valued, more than anything else, because of the eternal riddles posed by its model's unreadable expression. Coincidentally, the *onnamen* came into the world at more or less the same time as Da Vinci's painting (it is typically dated to the late 15th century), and it



of making masks out of a Western painting, he insists the question is the same: how do you create a reproduction of an earlier work? The essential techniques of creating noh masks—of carving features into Japanese cypress, of coloring the surface, and of applying lacquer—helped Yamaguchi recreate the cracks in the aging paint of the *Mona Lisa*, as well as the mold spots and stains on the Japanese paper used for Sharaku's prints.

Two of the most important elements of making noh masks are the aesthetic concepts of *koshoku* and *yūgen*. *Koshoku* refers to techniques that give a weathered, antique look to a mask that has just been made. By giving the mask an impression of having survived far longer than the real time of its making, a maker creates the impression of an enigmatic depth, and of the presence of another world far removed from this one. This sense of absent presence, in turn, is called “*yūgen*.”

Works like the *Mona Lisa* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, both of which have survived for centuries, give their viewers a sense of a world very different from the reality they know. Linking the *yūgen* of this art world with the *yūgen* of Noh, which has existed since the 14th century, has become the core of Yamaguchi's own art.

Through Yamaguchi's work, a new, contemporary stage has been created that demands new, contemporary masks, just as noh's original masks were born from the medium's roots as an avant-garde art form of the 14th century.

Today, Yamaguchi's exhibition continues its tour of the United States, including a stop at the Anthropology Museum at California State University, Sacramento, where it will play a part in the school's Festival of the Arts 2016 running from April 13 to 16.

This story originally published on IGNITION. Visit <http://ignition.co> for more features on Japanese culture.

ITATATTOO

French otaku tattoo artist Haku reflects on the genre in Japan and abroad

BY SAMUEL THOMAS

Back in the 2000s, getting inked was in vogue. The term “fashion tattoo” popped up especially to identify designs free from *yakuza* stigma, and Japan seemed reasonably ready to accept a tasteful tattoo in an inconspicuous location. However, like all subcultures that flirt with the mainstream, this wasn’t one that could last; the 2013 closure of popular magazine *Tattoo Burst* signaled that the bubble had gone the way of the title. In balance, otaku culture has been on the rise: the *yanki* ruffians have replaced their *ukiyoe* custom paint jobs with Hatsune Miku—after all, this is now the best way to give a middle finger to society, even if no one could quite predict how mainstream aspects of otaku culture would one day become.

This intersection gave birth to the “otaku tattoo,” a phenomenon that has its own “Otatoo Nights” club events helmed by the biggest names in the scene: Aki, who tattoos out of Diablo Art in Yokohama;



Aki - Diablo Art



Aki - Diablo Art

What drew you to Japan?

From as young as I can remember, I was fascinated with Japanese folklore, in particular its many mystical creatures. I loved dragons in particular; I was hooked on the tales of Yamata no Orochi, but I wanted to know more about the culture around it. It was a logical leap to modern folklore and creatures like Pokémon, as well as the mystical characters of visual-*kei* rock. Even now, they are the main focus of my work.

I embarked on a trip to Japan for the first time at 18 with my boyfriend, now my husband. We stayed there for around a month and decided that we owed it to ourselves to see what it would be like to live here. After several years of hard work saving up, we returned to Japan looking to stay there as long as possible.

Mana from Mana Tattoo in Yokohama; Mica from Tokyo’s own Detroit Diesel Tattoo Works; and Benny at Chopstick Tattoo Osaka. The stigma of the tattoo met with the popularization of the still-stigmatized otaku culture, and has become a rallying point for subcultural forces. And arguably, there is no greater badge of allegiance to the counterculture gang.

However, while otaku tattoos carry stigma in Japan, this isn’t necessarily the case abroad, where tattoos and pop-cultural imagery are increasingly *de rigueur*. This makes otaku tattoos dependent on their context in Japan. Should the tide turn in the same way that made AKB48 a household name instead of something you’d hide, maybe one day you might be able to display your fandom with pride. But perhaps not just yet?

Metropolis caught up with young Tokyo-based French otaku tattoo artist Haku, to see what is bringing fresh blood to the genre, and where the scene is now.



Benny - Chopstick Tattoo



Benny - Chopstick Tattoo



How did you break into tattooing in Japan?

I had been tattooing professionally for two years in France. When I arrived in Japan, I actively sought a tattoo studio passionate about tattoos, the history of the art, and who aims to pass something unique to its customers. I contacted Shiryudoh in Meguro out of the blue, met the team, showed them my work, and I knew it was where I had to work.

What is the difference between tattooing in Japan and France?

The difference is striking! In Europe—especially in France—tattoos are almost socially acceptable. As of 2015, more than one in 10 French people are tattooed, while in Japan, to be tattooed is a challenge to the status quo. It really affects your daily life. I think that is why, even in Tokyo, so many of our clients at my studio are foreign.

What makes an otaku tattoo?

I tend to say that global pop culture changes every few years, like fashion, while otaku—despite the emergence of new anime, video games, and other goods, the spirit and stigma—remains the same. What's strange is that, among foreigners, otaku is part of the popular culture of Japan; but it's more than that.

Is there a difference between how an otaku tattoo is seen in Japan and abroad?

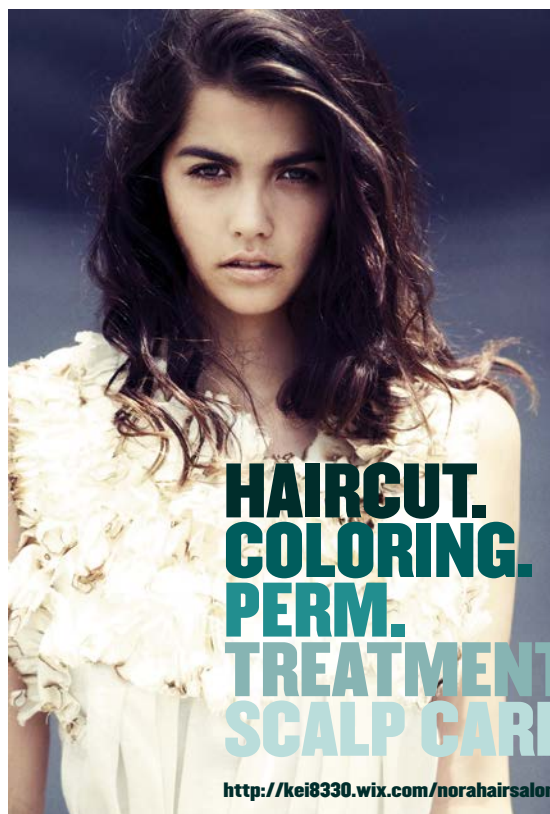
Yes, a big difference. In Japan, otaku are not very well-received, and so too are tattoos. Mixing the two is unthinkable for many Japanese people. But at the same time, Japanese people love their manga, their anime, so it always makes me happy to know that their love for the subject is strong enough that they would make this leap to have it tattooed, knowing the cost.

Abroad, it is completely inked in geek culture. Even in Tokyo, we have many foreign fans of Japanese animation, manga, or video games, asking for large- or medium-sized pieces in the otaku style. Japanese people are more comfortable with smaller tattoos and references that are not so obvious.

Do you think tattoos are becoming more or less taboo in Japan?

It seems that Japan has difficulty imagining tattoos other than *irezumi*. I hope with the Olympic Games in 2020, Tokyo will see more styles that aren't associated with negativity, and rediscover the art that has been part of this island's history before the conception of yakuza gangsters, and runs deep in Ainu culture. Right now, I get a feeling that tattoos are more taboo than ever in Japan, but I hope this will change.

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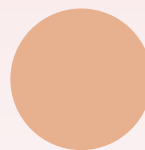
Make this season lighter and brighter

BY ALEXANDRE KERNBAUM

Spring is finally around the corner. And with warmer weather fast approaching, it's time to update your style with lighter and brighter clothing and cosmetics.

When choosing the right makeup, clear, light, or warm pastels are a must. Think "Japan in bloom," with cute, warm, golden-blond, or water-based colors to match your mood.

Spring is also the time to adjust your base foundation. Keep a cool base, but add some warmth into the mix. There is no magical rule here; just seek out the right professional advice and then get creative. Remember to keep it light, and don't be afraid to use your imagination.



Peach



Cherry blossom



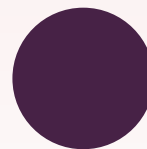
Japanese rose



Azalea



Red-blossomed plum tree



Plum



Willow



Freshly-budded Bracken

If your skin possesses a naturally warm hue, you may not need to add tone into your mixture. I recommend taking a mirror into a room with lots of natural light—or stand next to a window—to verify the color of the foundation before you move back to the bathroom to apply your makeup.

Choosing the right colors is essential. Keep an eye out for clothes and cosmetics in golden and dark beige, clear blue, turquoise, hazel, pink, pinkish purple, ivory, peach, light red, amber, and green.

On a local note, the seasonal colors found in kimono can provide inspiration for achieving a look that feels natural in Japan. For spring, some interesting combinations include yanagi (willow), yamabuki (Japanese rose), ume (plum), tsutsuji (azalea), sawarabi (freshly-budded bracken), sakura (cherry blossom), momo (peach), and kōbai (red-blossomed plum tree).

For hair color, it's time to add subtle highlights or even move to a lighter color. We all want to bring more shine to our hair at this time of the year, representing a new beginning.

For more tips, visit <http://bba-japan.com>.

Sprucing up for the Spring

It's that time of year when the trees try on some color and the city gives itself a fresh new look. Why not do the same? As the ice-cold winter palette goes on hiatus, springtime brings forth a chance to refresh, relax, and rejuvenate. Whether you're looking to rock new nails, eyelashes, or hairstyles, or give your skin a new glow, Tokyo's salons and clinics have you covered. Men need not be left out of the equation either—everyone deserves to look their best!



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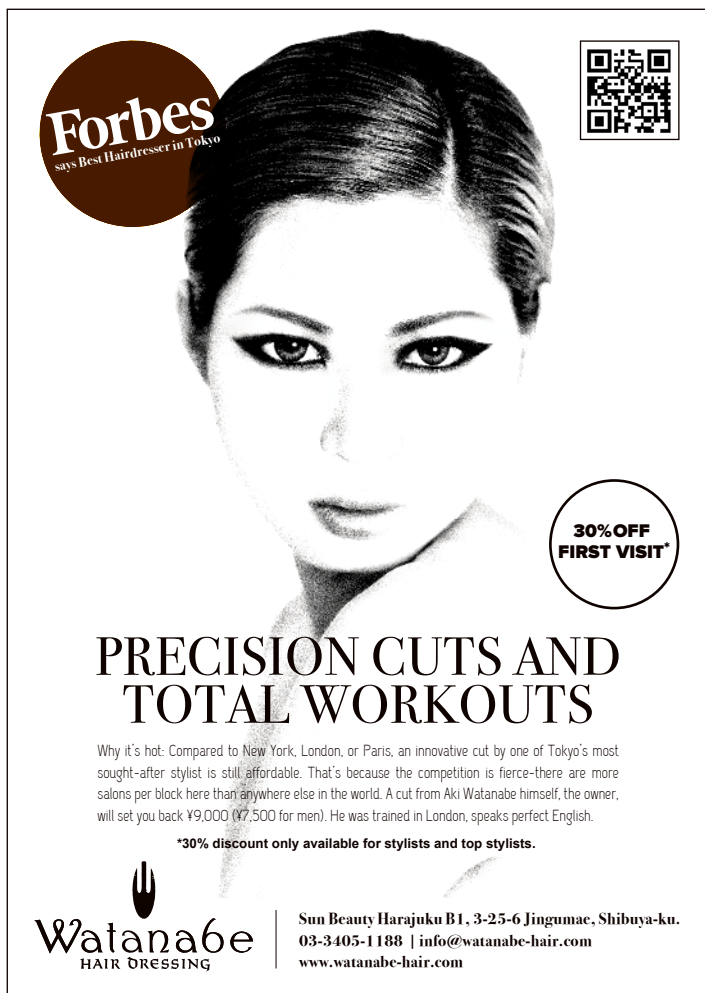
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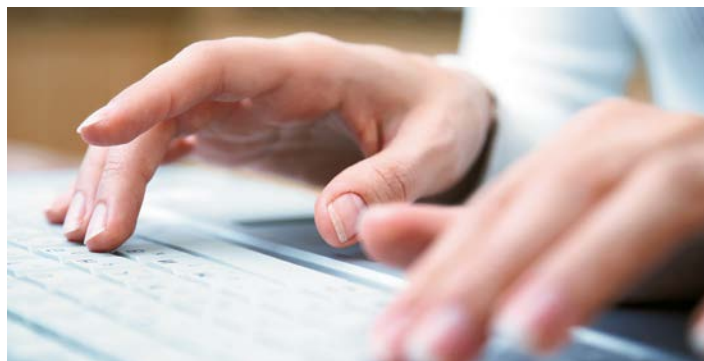
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BY GRACE BUCHELE MINETA



Grace Buchele Mineta is an author who blogs and draws comics about her daily life in Japan at www.HowIBecameTexan.com.

HOROSCOPE
BY CATHRYN MOE

♥ Love ♣ Money ♣ Luck

ARIES
Mar 21-Apr 20 ♥♥♥♥ ♣♣♣♣

Pressures mount. Friends share all the ways you can get through the latest maze presented to you. The solar eclipse with the New Moon in your 12th house brings constant change. It's also an auspicious time to start something new, or define what you'll take on and what you won't. Then Sun enters your sign—happy birthday!—and increases your energy as you form powerful connections, fast.

TAURUS
Apr 21-May 21 ♥♥ ♣♣ ♣♣

March is a watershed month. The solar eclipse brings fluidity to friendships, though you may find depths and levels you didn't know existed. Staying on the path of the straight and narrow becomes increasingly tricky. As the spring equinox arrives, so does clarity. When sharing your secrets, you may decide just to pass. Situations that appeared stable may have a few cracks starting to show.

GEMINI
May 22-Jun 21 ♥♥♥ ♣♣ ♣♣♣

Career matters, or how you are viewed by others, is really a key component to your month. The solar eclipse becomes a laser focus for this. You may discover things you didn't know about them, just as you may about yourself—surprise! By the time the spring equinox arrives, energy becomes available to look details full in the face, and choose what works best for you; this is as it should be. Support arrives.

CANCER
Jun 22-Jul 23 ♥♥ ♣♣♣ ♣♣

You may wonder if power has been ripped away from you, but it's old paradigm stuff and won't work much longer anyway. Better for you to have time to practice the new energies coming in, with your own upgrade along with them. You are more subtle, intuitive, and able to direct your focus towards results. The solar eclipse washes away what you don't need. The spring equinox starts the reset button.

LEO
Jul 24-Aug 23 ♥♥♥ ♣♣ ♣♣

March starts out as a bit of a test. The solar eclipse delves deeply and may bring up results, but not before you discover remnants of why things were blocked. Luckily, the spring equinox arrives just in time to revitalize your heart and hopes. Resources are likely to become available at this time. You can make a move on or after the lunar eclipse that follows. Embrace the warmth and opportunities of this full moon.

VIRGO
Aug 24-Sep 23 ♥♥♥♥ ♣ ♣♣

March is a month to hold onto everything, or let it go. Jupiter in your sign is beset with a pull that is almost impossible to resist. The solar eclipse only intensifies this. Mid-month, the stellium of Venus, Neptune, Ceres, Chiron, Mercury, and the Sun oppose Virgo. Stay true to yourself and watch for validation beginning with the spring equinox. Save your energy to use in the fourth and fifth weeks.

LIBRA
Sep 24-Oct 23 ♥♥ ♣♣ ♣♣♣

Your desire to help others must also be applied to your own needs in March. There is an enormous pull during the solar eclipse which brings things to the surface. You can reach further if you are in top condition. Venus, Neptune, Ceres, Chiron, Mercury, and the Sun want devotion to your work, but there is another side to your life. By the lunar eclipse full moon, you can begin to extend yourself again.

SCORPIO
Oct 24-Nov 22 ♥♥♥ ♣ ♣♣

While the rest of the zodiac is in various states of imploding, you have a chance to experience the surreal. The solar eclipse in your fifth house reveals just what needs to happen in your love life, or what can be amplified in creative ventures. Venus, Neptune, Ceres, Chiron, Mercury, and the Sun bring fantastic to fantasy. By the time the spring equinox arrives, your energy returns and you can start making it real.

SAGITTARIUS
Nov 23-Dec 22 ♥♥ ♣♣♣ ♣♣♣

March may be a bear for Sagittarians. So much is on offer that you cannot take it all in. Pressures mount as the solar eclipse amplifies each feeling and thought. Venus, Neptune, Ceres, Chiron, Mercury, and the Sun are square to your sign. It's a testing time, so don't be hard on yourself. Just put yourself where you really want to be. By the spring equinox, you'll be more in your element and enjoying inspiration.

CAPRICORN
Dec 23-Jan 20 ♥♥♥ ♣ ♣♣

The building blocks are falling down—this is a special shock to a Capricorn. Doing things for the old guard, respecting and honoring them, needs to be done their way, and it's in the process of being eroded. Go easy on yourself in March. The solar eclipse brings enormous potential to the surface. By the time the spring equinox arrives, you'll have a full fresh force of insight and offers to keep you happy.

AQUARIUS
Jan 21-Feb 19 ♥♥♥♥ ♣ ♣♣

As you say goodbye to Venus in your sign, be glad she's turning up in your solar second house of finance. You're an expert in the ups and downs of income. Your current "final exam" occurs during the solar eclipse. Venus, Neptune, Ceres, Chiron, Mercury, and the Sun are in a slippery sign, but as planets, they can be mystically auspicious. With the spring equinox comes a fresh perspective and a possible financial reward.

PISCES
Feb 20-Mar 20 ♥♥♥ ♣ ♣♣

March is your month. Plan for things to go your way. The main focus is to not overextend yourself with all the things you can completely sink into. Mercury, Neptune, Ceres, the Sun, the Moon, and Chiron are all in Pisces during the solar eclipse. Then Venus moves in, and it can be bliss on wheels. Make sure you have a strong foundation to keep everything in place!



AS A PHYSICALLY ENCUMBERED MAN, I REALLY APPRECIATE THAT, IN JAPAN, I AM GIVEN ‘PRIORITY.’”

about Japan. I usually answer in the negative—I have genuinely never really experienced culture shock—but if pushed, I give this response: “Japan appears to understand space differently.” Here, a crowd is seen as inevitable rather than something that can be avoided with careful planning. Whether it be crowded trains at JR Shinjuku Station, arguably one of the busiest train stations in the world; or busy streets such as Shibuya crossing, the famous scramble you see in movies; it’s fair to say that Japan has plenty of rising suns but little space.

Visit a restaurant, whether your favorite fast-food joint or a famous sushi spot, and you’ll find tables placed very close together. Virginia Woolf requested merely a room of one’s own; turns out she was too demanding. In Japan, our ambitions are more modest. Here, it appears that all we require is that little bit of the space-time continuum we currently occupy, with no further leg or elbow room apparently being necessary. Signs on trains often read “Please sit close to each other” so as to allow more passengers. This insistence on using all available space can be troubling if your body is prone to spasm. I find myself longing for a sign that reads, “Please keep a respectful distance.”

It’s perhaps unfair to call this the ugly, but the other issue is the number of staircases you encounter in Japan. The entrances and exits of many temples, shrines, shopping centers, and train stations are often a huge and rather steep staircase. Part of the reason for this is practicality: during typhoons, you really don’t want to be on the ground floor; there’s safety in being higher up. However, it is partly a now-redundant inheritance from ancient times, when the rich and the powerful built monuments to inspire fear and wonder. You may arrive at a metropolitan area station—JR Kanda and JR Harajuku are notable offenders; particularly the latter, being so close to Meiji Shrine—to find few or no escalators and many stairs. Just as London has Big Ben and New York has Times Square, Tokyo demands that we look upon its mighty staircases and despair.

■ Michael Peckitt is an academic and writer. For more of his work, visit www.accessible-japan.com/category/notes-from-the-obstacle-course/

BARRIER-FREE JAPAN

Finding accessibility in the world’s tightest spaces

BY MICHAEL GILLAN PECKITT



Japan is obsessed with barriers. At least it seems that way to me. The names of two of Japan’s central regions, Kanto and Kansai, could be read as “East of the Barrier” and “West of the Barrier.” It’s true that a better translation would be “gate” instead of “barrier”—but nonetheless, the notion of a barrier is certainly implied.

It’s also worth noting that the Japanese word for “disability,” *shōgai*, translates as “obstacle”—so a disabled person, *shōgaisha*, is literally an “obstacle person.” That’s not to say that Japan’s interest in barriers is always negative. Public institutions like to show they have a progressive attitude towards disability, so you

will come across a sign that reads “barrier-free,” meaning that the building is accessible.

For the most part, Japan is accessible. Many buildings have escalators and elevators, and in the major cities, the transport system—particularly the trains and subways with their “priority seats” for use by those who are elderly, pregnant, accompanied by children, or disabled—is very good. You will often see a station guard appear with a ramp to help wheelchair users on and off the carriage. As someone who, back in Britain, was denied access on more than one occasion to both buses and trains; for the most part, I admire Japan’s attitude toward transport. In Britain, the denial was on the grounds that there were “too many children and handicapped people.” So, as a physically encumbered man, I really appreciate that, in Japan, I am given “priority.” It’s all good.

Well, it’s mostly good. While Japan in general, and Tokyo in particular, is very accessible to a disabled person, there are still issues. The bad and the ugly, to borrow a phrase. One of the main problems a disabled person might face comes from the lack of space. People back in the country I hail from ask me about culture shock and if there’s anything that disturbs me

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